

“*Only One Way?* guides us unerringly through the contemporary world of religious pluralism and points us to Jesus Christ alone as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Grasping the central truth that the Christian gospel is unintelligible apart from the uniqueness of Christ, these pages expound it in a variety of insightful ways. Here are six scholars and pastors boldly upholding the only kind of Christianity worthy of the name. We should be thankful for each of them!”

—SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON, Senior Minister,
The First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina

“Although religious pluralism is often treated as a ‘postmodern’ phenomenon, it has always been the world’s most fundamental challenge to the gospel. The authors of this thoughtful work press us, as the apostles did, to stand against the world for the world’s sake. Only one way? At a time when many evangelicals don’t seem so sure these writers help us to confidently answer yes!”

—MICHAEL HORTON, Gresham Machen Professor of
Systematic Theology and Apologetics,
Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, California.

“There is a battle raging in the world today—it is a battle for truth. And in a day when the god of relativism governs hearts and minds throughout the world, Christians cannot be silent. This timely book calls God’s people to action. I am thankful the Lord has raised up faithful men to stand firm and proclaim boldly the truth about God’s truth. Amid all the confusion surrounding postmodernism and pluralism, this book clears the air. God’s people will know where to turn as the Lord tears down strongholds and redirects the world to the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”

—BURK PARSONS, Editor of *Tabletalk* magazine;
Minister of Congregational Life, Saint Andrew’s Chapel,
Sanford, Florida.

Only One Way?

Reaffirming the Exclusive Truth Claims of Christianity

Edited by RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

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Preface

A major shift is taking place in the consciousness of Western civilization, a shift that greatly impacts the Christian church. This shift is known as the movement from *modernity* to *postmodernity*. Modernity was proud, confident, and certain. But its postmodern stepchild is marked by despair, suspicion, and confusion. Some Christians have hailed postmodernity as a breath of fresh air in which the Holy Spirit's hand may be perceived—a refreshing sign of repentance from the sins of modernity. But at least one feature of postmodernity—in fact, a central feature—is its espousal of relativism in matters of truth. So what happens to the exclusive claims of the Christian faith in such an environment? Can we—should we—continue to assert that ours is the one truth from heaven? Is it still necessary to worship only the Christian expression of God? Can we really continue to insist that Jesus is the only Savior, apart from whom we must perish under God's wrath?

The contributors to this book are convinced that Christians can continue to affirm the exclusive claims of the biblical message, indeed, that we must defend especially these claims if we are to communicate effectively the biblical gospel to a postmodern world. As Philip Ryken asserts: “For all its insights, postmodernism must be recognized as an attack on the very foundations of truth, and we must join the battle at the very place where truth is under attack” (p. 92).

The six chapters of this book follow a general progression. The introductory chapter by David Wells locates us with the apostle Paul in the pagan Athens of Acts 17. If there has ever been a time

since the Reformation when Christians find themselves in a situation like Paul's Athens, that time is now. Peter Jones follows in chapter 2 by noting that at its foundation, neo-pagan postmodernism involves a rejection of the biblical idea of God himself. Both Wells and Jones warn Christians—and especially evangelists and apologists—of our great need to understand the intellectual and spiritual environment of our time. Both perceive a threat as well as an opportunity for a biblically faithful and intellectually credible Christian witness to the postmodern age.

The middle two chapters tackle specific topics that are under siege by the world and are also in danger of abandonment by postmodern-minded Christians. Chapter 3 (my chapter) considers the biblical claim of Jesus Christ as the world's only Savior. Can we continue to insist that people must believe on Jesus Christ—and him only—in order to be saved? What is the biblical basis for such a claim? Why is this such a hotly contested doctrine? Philip Ryken then confronts us in chapter 4 with Pontius Pilate's unforgettable question, posed to Jesus himself during the Roman trial: "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Is there one truth from God, or must we agree that there are as many truths as there are perspectives?

The book concludes with two chapters directed not so much to the conflict of ideas between Christianity and the world, but to the Christian's own embrace of the Bible's call to exclusivity. In Chapter 5, Ligon Duncan reflects on the "one people" united through faith in Jesus Christ. If we are to be a people of truth, we must together be the people we are called to be. Lastly, in chapter 6, D. A. Carson ponders whether this exclusivity penetrates to the living of our lives. Is there "one way" in which Christians must live? If so, what is it, and how can people like us ever hope to fulfill it?

This material originated as conference addresses to the 2005 Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology (PCRT), sponsored by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and this book is

published as a partnership between the Alliance and Crossway Books. We chose the theme, *One Way*, because of our mission to promote “clarity and conviction about the great evangelical truths of the gospel and to proclaim these truths powerfully in our contemporary context.” I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Robert Brady, executive vice president of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and to our wonderful staff—especially those who work so hard to put on this historic conference year after year. I also thank Allan Fisher and all his colleagues at Crossway Books, not only for their hard work on this volume but for all their stalwart labors to advance the gospel. Lastly, I join with all the contributors in asking God for his richest blessings on all who consider what we have written, that faith might be renewed and strength be added to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the one Way, the one Truth, and the one Life (John 14:6). To him be glory forever.

Richard D. Phillips
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One Way

D. A. CARSON

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.”

MATTHEW 7:13¹

I am sure you have occasionally followed the editorial pages of a newspaper when people are writing on religious matters. Particularly during some controversy, someone will sooner or later say, “I could put up with those Christians if they just followed Jesus a little more. I mean, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, ‘Turn the other cheek,’ and things like that. But all these Christians do nothing but condemn other people.”

Sometimes painful experiences lurk behind these complaints. Christians are not always consistent. For all our claims about loving God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves, too frequently our integrity breaks down. Of course, some heated resentments against Christians spring less from Christian failures than from the very nature of Christianity: its claims to be exclusive can be very irritating in a pluralistic age. And inevitably, the two issues frequently become confused in the minds of outside observers who have had rather mixed experiences with

¹Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references quoted in this chapter are taken from the *New International Version* of the Bible (NIV).

actual Christians. Embarrassed by the criticisms, even some Christians join their critics and begin to ask the question, Does Christianity really demand one way of life in contrast with all others?

Sharp Antitheses: Two Ways

Since critics often measure Christians against Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, let us begin there. One of the first things a careful inquirer finds is that the Sermon on the Mount is anything but simplistic. The same Jesus who says, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged," also says, "Do not throw your pearls to pigs"—which means somebody has to figure out who the swine are (Matt. 7:1, 6). The same Jesus who says "Turn . . . the other [cheek]" (Matt. 5:39) adds, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, some startlingly antithetical things. Particularly in the last section, Matthew 7:13–29, Jesus casts four striking antitheses: two ways, two trees, two claims, and two foundations. In each instance, there are but two possibilities, there are only two ways, one of which is right and the other wrong.

First there are two ways: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matt. 7:13–14). According to Jesus, God's way is not spacious. It is in some sense confining and relatively unpopular. Only a few find it, we are told. This is not meant to suggest that there aren't millions and millions of redeemed on the last day (look at the book of Revelation!). It does mean that this is the common appearance of things in this world, for in most contexts Christians are vastly outnumbered by unbelievers. Inevitably, the Christian way is viewed as narrow, restricted, dense, and unpopular.

Next, Jesus speaks of two trees: "Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does

not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them” (Matt. 7:17–20). On first reading, this seems simple enough: one tree produces good fruit and another tree produces bad fruit. But Jesus sets this antithesis in a context which makes it much more challenging. He is concerned with false teaching in the church: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matt. 7:15–16).

It is tough enough to make your way in this world and try to defend the truth of the Scriptures, the glory of Christ, and what the cross is about to people who are completely outside, or who are completely opposed to the gospel, people who have no Christian heritage at all. But it is all the more difficult when we consider the situation within the church. Here we find people who in some sense have understanding of Christian terminology and Christian commitments, but who are subtly steering away from what is central in favor of what is at best peripheral. Initial evaluation demands that we be charitable, so we hopefully affirm, “Oh, yes, here is a brother, a sister.” But then we listen more attentively to what they are actually saying, and we stop and think, *Is this right? Does this square with Scripture?* Suddenly, we discover that the most dangerous teachers are not the ones who are on the outside, but the ones who are on the inside of the church—the ones who are respected, privileged, informed, well-educated, seminary trained, and who certainly display all our forms of piety. If you begin to question them, they say, “I’m a Christian, just like you.” Aren’t they the hardest ones to handle? For at least in some instances, we may not even be sure we are right in our negative assessment. We wonder, am I just too narrow, bigoted, right wing, and old-fashioned?

Of course, this is nothing new. When the apostle Paul addressed the Ephesian elders, he warned them that from their own number some would arise as ravenous wolves to destroy the flock.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself says, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing” (Matt. 7:15). They wear the right clothes, and they sound like sheep, complete with appropriate bleats. But watch out for those teeth! It is within this context that Jesus says that we can finally distinguish them by their fruit.

The trouble, of course, is that fruit often takes a long time to grow, and we want instant discernment. Wouldn’t it be nice if every single movement that came along was either stamped *Made in Heaven* or *Designed in the Pit*? Then you could bless it or damn it and get on with life. But rarely do movements arise with such clear identity. They may have a veneer stamped *Made in Heaven*, but inwardly they may be dangerous and destructive. It may take quite a long time before the fruit finally emerges and shows the reality for what it is. By then how many generations of young or uninformed Christians have been influenced or even stamped by these errors?

Two ways, two trees, and now two claims. One claim seems very religious, pious, and spiritual. Many say, “Lord, Lord.” But Jesus insists that it’s not the one who says, “Lord, Lord” who enters on the last day but the one who does the will of his Father in heaven. Moreover, it’s not a matter of verbal claims alone, but of conduct. “Many,” Jesus says, “will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, how can you possibly exclude us? I preached and preached. In fact, I’ve been endowed with the gift of prophecy, and I’ve done all of this in your name. Indeed, in your name I’ve cast out demons. In your name I’ve performed miracles. And you tell me now I can’t get in? If anybody’s qualified to get in—well, I mean, I’ve done all of this in your name, Jesus’” (Matt. 7:22, author’s paraphrase). But still Jesus will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (Matt. 7:23). No, the only one who enters, we are told, is the one who does the will of Jesus’ Father who is in heaven.

Then comes the last of these four vignettes: two foundations.

One person builds his house on solid rock that can withstand any of the storms of life while the other builds on sand. When a violent storm assaults these two houses, the first remains immovable. The ground on which the second is built turns into a quagmire, and the building itself turns out to be about as stable as certain hillside homes in California (see Matt. 7:24–27).

Now what are we to make of all of this? Is this realistic? Why must we choose between a narrow gate with a small, narrow road, and a broad gate with a wide road? How about an in-between road—not too narrow, not wide and relativistic, but sort of in-between? How about trees that produce things that Garrison Keillor would deem “pretty good”? He offers us “pretty good” poems and an entire catalog of “pretty good” stuff. Surely he is the sort of person who would prefer trees which, while they may not produce either crab apples or honest-to-goodness New Zealand Gala apples, nevertheless yield pretty good apples. Will that do? Isn’t this the way we want to operate? “Yes, I know there’s a certain amount of inconsistency in all of us, but, Lord, it must count for something that we’ve actually preached in your name and in your name dispatched demons. Admittedly, I have committed some sins, but how about the fact that I am principled and obedient a lot of the time?” Will that do? Is it really a choice between solid rock and sand? How about hardpan clay?

Yes, but . . .

In fact, if we find such sharp antitheses difficult to live with, we need to remind ourselves that the Bible itself multiplies such antitheses. In one sense, therefore, the more biblically we think about these sets of sharply defined ways—one right and the other wrong—the more we find ourselves warned to be careful.

Many passages offer the sharpest antitheses, not least in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy, for example, says, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and

death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live” (Deut. 30:19). And there are texts like Psalm 1, sometimes called a *wisdom* Psalm, which offers only two ways to live:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. (Ps. 1:1–3)

That’s the good side. But verse 4 takes up the antithesis: “Not so the wicked!” Everything fundamental that you can postulate of the righteous, you must deny to the unrighteous. Do the righteous avoid the counsel of ungodly people? Not so the wicked! Do the righteous avoid the lifestyle, the way of living and conduct, of ungodly people? Not so the wicked! Do the righteous avoid a condescending, sneering mockery? Not so the wicked! Do the righteous love the Word of God, such that they delight in it and meditate on it day and night? Not so the wicked! Are the righteous like a tree that puts down its roots and is always showing signs of life, always green and full, and in due course produces fruit? Not so the wicked!

Well, what are the wicked like? They’re like the chaff that the wind blows away, we’re told—lifeless, fruitless, rootless, unstable, insignificant—an absolute antithesis to the living and fruitful tree. Indeed, the psalm ends with one final and devastating antithesis: “The LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps. 1:6).

The contrast presented in these passages could not be more sharply antithetical. But the reflective reader of Scripture responds, “Yes, yes, I hear these principles. I see that this is taught in holy Scripture. But do not the actual histories of biblical people show

that the antitheses of these texts need to be somewhat attenuated? Is it not the case that most people produce some good fruit and some bad fruit? Do not believers in the Bible commonly alternate between rock foundation and sand, between the narrow way and the broad? For instance, what about David? He was a man after God's own heart, mightily praised, yet he ended up committing adultery and murder. What about Abraham? Yes, he was called "a friend of God," and he is the ultimate patriarch. Yes, he is the archetypal man of faith. But at the end of the day he is also a liar. And then there's the great patriarchal family. One of them is sleeping with his daughter-in-law, and another is sleeping with his father's concubine. Ten of them are trying to sell the eleventh into slavery, unless they decide to murder him instead. And these are the patriarchs!

For further evidence, we might adduce Peter. Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:17–18). Immediately, Peter tries to give Jesus a theology lesson and urges him not to die on the cross! Then on top of all of that, despite being warned off, Peter manages to swear and insist that he never met Jesus and with foul language disowns him entirely. Even after Pentecost Peter gets his theology wrong in Antioch and has to be rebuked by another apostle (Gal. 2:11–14).

Only two ways to live? "Give me a break," people respond. "Wouldn't it be better to speak of a spectrum?" Even believers are sometimes good, sometimes bad. Isn't that what you find in your own life? So where do these antitheses come from? Why is Jesus' language so sharp?

A Closer Look

We had better look a little more closely at these antitheses from the Sermon on the Mount. Start with the structure of the sermon, and

thus how it fits together. My father used to tell me that a text without a context becomes a pretext for a proof text, so when I was still quite young I learned to look at the context.

The Sermon on the Mount runs through Matthew 5, 6, and 7. The body of the sermon, the heart of the passage, runs from 5:17 to 7:12. It's marked by what is sometimes called an *inclusio*—a kind of literary marker, a bracket at the front end and at the back end—that resonates with the same words or themes and says, “This is what I’m talking about.” The front of an *inclusio* tells us, “This is what I will be teaching”; the back says, “So that’s what this was about.”

The body of the Sermon on the Mount begins with Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:17: “Do not think that I have come to abolish *the Law or the Prophets*; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Then, in Matthew 7:12 Jesus concludes: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up *the Law and the Prophets*.” Within this *inclusio*, Jesus has a great deal to say about the kingdom, but the *inclusio* itself alerts the reader to that fact that the Sermon on the Mount relates Jesus’ teaching regarding the kingdom to the Law and the Prophets. The Sermon on the Mount is about this: Jesus announces and describes the kingdom of heaven as the fulfillment of earlier Scripture, of the law and the prophets.

But before the body of the Sermon on the Mount begins in Matthew 5:17, we find the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–10), which give us what some have called the “norms of the kingdom.” Have you noticed the blessing promised by the first Beatitude? “Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 5:3). The last of these Beatitudes promises the same reward: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 5:10). Here, then, is another simple *inclusio*, another literary marker. We must understand that the Beatitudes treat the kingdom of heaven; they provide the norms of

the kingdom. This is what the kingdom of heaven looks like. This is the way people in the kingdom of heaven act. The last beatitude is then expanded to warn us about persecution for those who live in this way (Matt. 5:11–12). We are to live as the Beatitudes prescribe—as salt and light in this fallen, dark, and decaying world (Matt. 5:13–16).

The Beatitudes provide the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, followed by the Sermon’s body that explains what the kingdom is and does, and how it fulfills the Old Testament anticipation. After this body of instruction, when we come to the very end of the Sermon on the Mount, we find the antitheses that we have already surveyed. Two ways to live—just two ways—the narrow way or the broad way: that’s the first antithesis. Producing good fruit or bad fruit: that’s the second. Our claim before Jesus is backed up by either character and conduct or just empty words: that’s the third antithesis. Then we have the fourth: building on rock or building on sand.

How on earth are we to live this out? To answer rightly, let us now nestle the Sermon on the Mount within the whole flow of the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew, like all four canonical Gospels, can be described as a passion narrative preceded by a long introduction. That is, all of the Gospels—the biblical Gospels at least—are stories about Jesus’ ministry on his way to the cross and resurrection. They convey the good news of Jesus going to the cross.

This reminds us of the real reason that *The Da Vinci Code*, which depends for its argument on a lot of late “gospels,” and the recently unearthed *The Gospel of Judas*, which has garnered so much attention, are such nonsense. I mean that in the strictest sense of the word: historically speaking, as *gospels* they are nonsense. A great deal of the argumentation in *The Da Vinci Code* depends on late second- and third-century gnostic documents, including one called *The Gospel of Philip*. There is nothing wrong with that title, except that by first-century standards it’s not a gospel, and in any

case it's not by Philip. Apart from that the title is pretty accurate! You see, a gospel in the first century was bound up with the "good news" of Jesus Christ. In the first century they didn't speak of four *Gospels*; they spoke of "*the* Gospel according to Matthew," "*the* Gospel according to Mark," "*the* Gospel according to Luke," and "*the* Gospel according to John."

There is just one gospel. This one gospel of Jesus Christ, attested by the first four books of the New Testament, has certain essential features. The gospel is the account of what Jesus came to do, climaxing in the cross and the resurrection. What permits us to call each of these first four books of the New Testament *a* Gospel is that it presents *the* gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ, born among us, serving, teaching, preaching, healing, transforming, announcing, inaugurating his kingdom and, finally, going to the cross himself as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28). On the night that he was betrayed, he explained that the blood that he was shedding is the blood of the new covenant. By the second century, each of these four books came to be called *a* Gospel because it so faithfully conveyed *the* gospel.

But the books that were written at the end of the second century and in the third century, which called themselves *gospels*, clearly failed to understand the derivation. So when I read something like *The Gospel of Thomas*, which consists of 114 sayings (there are only two tiny snippets of ostensible history in the entire document) or *The Gospel of Philip*, I see that it is not properly called a *gospel* at all. Rather, it is what later gnostic heretics put in place of the gospel because they do not want the cross and the resurrection. They want wise utterances that we can "know," so that if you have this "knowledge," this *gnosis*, then you have an inside track to spirituality. But what they offer is not the gospel at all.

The gospel is the good news that Christ Jesus came to save sinners by his life, death, and resurrection—to save them not merely from condemnation but from the practice of sin. We are saved

from everything loaded with rebellion against God: the performance and habits and self-deceit of sin, the wretched idolatry that dethrones God, and all the condemnation and enslavement that accrue because of such anarchic rebellion. We are not saved because we have learned some wise sayings. We are saved because Jesus is the king, and his unutterably powerful reign undoes evil and will one day transform this broken world into the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness. We are saved because he is the high priest, perfectly mediating between the holy God and his sinful image-bearers. We are saved because he is the prophet: he perfectly brings the Word of God, and he is himself the Word of God. He inaugurates the kingdom, and in the Sermon on the Mount he shows us what must characterize this kingdom: no hate, no lust, no deceit, no lying. That is why Jesus sets forth his kingdom norms in the Sermon on the Mount: he has already inaugurated the kingdom.

Already in measure the followers of Jesus Christ—those who have been healed by him, forgiven by him, and transformed by him—are to reflect these priorities. These are the norms of the kingdom. These constitute kingdom ethics.

At the end of the day, there are only two ways—the way of the kingdom or the way of death. But still, we cannot save ourselves by obeying the Sermon on the Mount. This is why Christians have always recognized that the Sermon on the Mount simultaneously tells us how to live and exposes us to the fact that we cannot meet the challenge. It probes us deeply and shows us our inconsistencies and our double standards. Yes, do not commit adultery: perhaps we can manage that. But Jesus tells us we are not even supposed to lust. Suddenly we do not know where to hide our shame. Do not commit murder: fine; most of us will manage a passing grade on that one. But Jesus insists we are not supposed to hate. Again, we are so ashamed that we do not know where to look. Then Jesus comes to the end of his exhortations and says, “There are only two

ways: one is right and leads to life, the other is wrong and leads to death.” The four antitheses leave us no place to hide.

Let me tell you frankly: if the Gospel of Matthew ended after chapter 7, I would be in despair. But the kingdom that Jesus comes to inaugurate is more than a batch of moral instruction. Its power is bound up with Jesus’ death and resurrection on behalf of his people, and all the transformation of individuals that flows from that death and resurrection. That’s why in the book of Acts, in the earliest records of the post-Pentecost believers, when Christians describe themselves as “followers of the Way,” they ultimately mean that Jesus is the way. After all, that is what Jesus explicitly taught: “I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). It turns out that we’re not going to succeed in following the Way if the Way is nothing more than our righteousness and our consistency. There is a “way” of life we must follow, yet ultimately Jesus himself is the Way, and that’s why the apostle Peter, after the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ, could pronounce that there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name given to us under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

The Sermon on the Mount sets forth the starkest challenge. After all, at the end of chapter 5, Jesus says, “Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48). If that’s the standard, I’m done. But then we read further in Matthew’s Gospel, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. . . . I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:12–13). And then Jesus goes to the cross.

Do you know the New Testament book that sets out this tension most dramatically—this tension between the demand for perfection, the insistence that we must have perfection before God, and the frankest recognition that we are not a perfect people? Do you know which book it is? It’s 1 John. After the initial paragraph that introduces the book, John begins by insisting in the strongest lan-

guage—and he’s writing to Christians—that if anyone says he doesn’t sin, he’s a liar. The truth isn’t in him. If anyone says he hasn’t sinned, he’s kidding himself. It’s worse than that. Such a person is actually calling God a liar because God says that we do sin. He’s kidding himself, he’s not telling the truth, and he’s calling God a liar, because the fact of the matter is that we sin; God says we do (1:10). The proper solution, John says, is not to deny that we commit sin; rather, the proper solution is this: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). That’s the solution. In short, John comforts us by reminding us we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, who is the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2).

But the tension can be from either end. For just when we think that such freedom and grace in the gospel guarantee a carefree passage, we are told that if we don’t believe the truth—certain definite truths about Jesus—we’re not in. Then John says that if we are not obedient to Christ, if we do not bow the knee before him morally, we are not in. If we do not love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not in. The language gets stronger and stronger until we come to these shocking words, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him” (3:9). A Christian cannot go on sinning because he has been born of God. I know all the arguments about what a Greek present tense means and how a Christian might not *go on sinning* but sin once in awhile, but isn’t that peeling the onion pretty fine? In short, John’s moral commandments seem to exclude people like me.

What do we do with this? In the light of a book that has already begun by saying, “We are all going to sin,” it is helpful to remember that the word *cannot* does not always provide us with an ontological impossibility. It does not always mean something that cannot possibly be. Sometimes it provides us with a moral imperative.

Let me give you an example. When I was a lad in school, in

grade seven, we had a teacher who had been in World War II in the Canadian army. He wished, I think, that he were still in the army, and we did, too. He was not God's gift to teaching. He thought that students would and should and could obey him exactly the way soldiers would obey a drill sergeant. Understandably, he found it very difficult to control a classroom.

Now, if there was one thing he loathed with a passion, it was gum chewing. If he found somebody chewing gum, he would pick up the rubbish can by his desk, hobble down the aisle, stand beside that student, and stick the dustbin right under the student's nose. Then with all his limited eloquence he would solemnly intone:

*A gum-chewing boy and a cud-chewing cow
Look so much alike, yet different somehow.
What is the difference? Ah, I see it now:
'Tis the thoughtful look in the face of the cow.*

And then he would shout, "Spit!"

What was Mr. Cooper telling this miscreant? This ritual was, in fact, a way of informing him and the rest of us in the class, "You cannot chew gum here." What I want to point out is that even then I realized that it would have quite missed the point if I had lifted my hand in the third row and said, "Mr. Cooper, ontologically speaking, you're mistaken. You say I cannot chew gum here—but I'm doing it!" For in reality, Mr. Cooper was not stating an ontological impossibility; he was expressing a moral imperative. The words *You cannot chew gum here* mean, in this context, "You *must not* chew gum in class! If you do, you are out of line and will be in big trouble."

This is the very way the Bible sets out two ways. There is one right way and one wrong way, the wise way and the foolish way, the godly way and the ungodly way, the narrow way and the broad way. The Bible speaks with an absolute antithesis: You cannot sin

here. Sinning is not done here. Sinning is always without excuse: you cannot sin here. It quite misses the point to say, “Well, ontologically speaking, you’re mistaken; I’m doing it.” Sinning is *not* done here. Yet John has already recognized in his first chapter-and-a-half that, God help us, we do sin here.

In fact, Jesus Christ died for sinners. He bore our sins in his own body on the tree; his sacrifice turns aside the righteous wrath of God, and Jesus himself remains our advocate and high priest forever. He has poured out his Spirit upon us as the down payment of the full inheritance yet to come. Although we are not yet in the consummated glory—not yet in the new heavens and the new earth, where we really will not sin at all—already, right now, among Christ’s people, it has been declared, “You cannot sin here. Sinning is not done here.” And when, poor, frail, creatures that we are, we do sin, we return to the one place where there is hope: the cross of Christ. On the one hand, we desperately need the absolute antitheses so that we learn resolutely not to make excuses for our sin; on the other, we need the frank candor of the biblical histories to remind us that God, rich in mercy, while never for a moment diminishing the splendor of his holiness, accepts poor sinners still. For such tension, there is only one resolution: the cross, the cross, always the cross.

One Way: Jesus Christ

So we are driven back to the cross again and again and again:

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.*

For, you see, if the antitheses of Scripture remind us that there are two ways to live, they also tell us that there is only one way to God. At one level we can say it is the way of righteousness. But because we are sinners still, our only way forever remains the one who said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). *Except through me.*